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ABSTRACT

Language appears at multiple levels of representation in memory. In most cases, languages have a particular system of sounds (phonology), meaning (semantics), form (orthography), and common usage (pragmatics). For a bilingual speaker, these appear for two different sets of concepts. Sometimes, these concepts overlap, as is the case for translations. In other cases, languages have separate representations for language-specific ideas. In this article, the cognitive models that are currently used to describe multiple language representation in memory will be described with reference to how form and meaning are related across languages. How one acquires a new language will be reviewed as well as the development of connections between languages. Next, word types will be mentioned such as concrete, abstract, and emotion with an eye towards how they are uniquely coded in a dominant versus a subordinate language. Emotion words tend to be more closely tied to the native or dominant language, than to a secondary or subordinate language. A discussion of this finding will lead directly into a discussion of how emotion-laden information can best be expressed through the strategic use of language switching and language mixing, and of how a bilingual form of therapy can provide positive outcomes within a counseling or clinical setting. (Contains 20 references.) (Author/GCP)

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The Role of Language and Emotion in Therapy with Bilingual Clients

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Language appears at multiple levels of representation in memory. In most cases, languages have a particular system of sounds (phonology), meaning (semantics), form (orthography), and common usage (pragmatics). For a bilingual speaker, these appear for two different sets of concepts. Sometimes, these concepts overlap, as is the case for translations. In other cases, languages have separate representations for language-specific ideas. In this article, the cognitive models that are currently used to describe multiple language representation in memory will be described with reference to how form and meaning are related across languages. How one acquires a new language will be reviewed as well as the development of connections between languages. Next, word types will be mentioned such as concrete, abstract, and emotion with an eye towards how they are uniquely coded in a dominant versus a subordinate language. Emotion words tend to be more closely tied to the native or dominant language, than to a secondary or subordinate language. A discussion of this finding will lead directly into a discussion of how emotion-laden information can best be expressed through the strategic use of language switching and language mixing, and of how a bilingual form of therapy can provide positive outcomes within a counseling or clinical setting.

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Language appears at multiple levels of representation in memory. In most cases, languages have a particular system of sounds (phonology), meaning (semantics), form (orthography), and common usage (pragmatics). For a bilingual speaker, these appear for two different sets of concepts. Sometimes, these concepts overlap, as is the case for translations. In other cases, languages have separate representations for language-specific ideas. In this article, the cognitive models that are currently used to describe multiple language representation in memory will be described with reference to how form and meaning are related across languages. How one acquires a new language will be reviewed as well as the development of connections between languages. Next, word types will be mentioned such as concrete, abstract, and emotion with an eye towards how they are uniquely coded in a dominant versus a subordinate language. Emotion words tend to be more closely tied to the native or dominant language, than to a secondary or subordinate language. A discussion of this finding will lead directly into a discussion of how emotion-laden information can best be expressed through the strategic use of language switching and language mixing, and of how a bilingual form of therapy can provide positive outcomes within a counseling or clinical setting.

The Role of Language and Emotion in Therapy with Bilingual Clients

Introduction

Researchers have agreed that bilingualism is much more the norm in most parts of the world, as compared to monolingualism. With this realization, research and theoretical development related to how bilinguals encode, store, and retrieve language has gained much ground in the past ten years (see e.g., Heredia & Altarriba, 2001, 2002). Exploring this question has involved the in-depth study and understanding of how bilinguals code two separate languages in terms of phonology, orthography, semantics, pragmatics, and the like. At times, it appears that semantic or conceptual understanding overlaps across languages. That is, a word in one language and its translation are each tied to the same conceptual representation in memory. However, it is often the case that words do not seem to have a direct one-to-one correspondent in another language (see Altarriba, 2002, for a review). Language-specific concepts may be difficult or near impossible to express in a different language. Further, different regions of the brain appear to be activated by different language inputs, as a function of the age of acquisition and the specific languages that are acquired (Kim, Relkin, Lee, & Hirsch, 1997). But what can be gained by an understanding of the uniqueness of conceptual representation in a specific language for a bilingual speaker? The answer to this question lies in understanding the role that learning and memory plays in the coding of emotion words (e.g., angry, sad, or joy) in different languages. Given the prevalence of emotion words and emotion word knowledge that is used to express ideas, memories, beliefs, and feelings within a therapeutic context (see e.g., Altarriba & Santiago-Rivera, 1994; Santiago-Rivera & Altarriba, 2002), it is important to understand how emotions are

learned, how they become mentally represented in the mental lexicon, and how they are differentially applied in various languages.

In the current article, the reader is introduced to the variety of cognitive models that bilingual researchers use today to try to explain the acquisition of multiple languages, the representation of words and concepts in bilingual memory, and the distinction between different word types in language processing. The section that follows will discuss the literature concerning the distinction between word types across languages and the techniques used to describe various categories of words. Specific work on emotions will be described next with an eye towards discussing their role in the therapeutic environment and how they are coded differentially as a function of language dominance. Finally, suggestions regarding the ways in which this linguistic knowledge might inform bilingual approaches or techniques for maximizing effectiveness in therapy will be described. The above entails taking a cognitive approach to the understanding of the role of language and emotion in working with Spanish-English bilingual clients.

Cognitive Models of Bilingual Memory

Researchers in the area of cognition and bilingualism strive to understand the structure and function of memory and the mental representations that store our general knowledge about the world. This semantic or conceptual knowledge guides are everyday actions including our ability to make decisions, learn new information, acquire a new language, and the like. Models or theories are then derived that allow for the testing of hypotheses regarding human behavior and cognitive processing. In the case of bilingual memory, models have been proposed to explain how the mind stores both lexical (word) and conceptual (meaning) representations and uses those representations in order to

communicate. A bilingual model of language acquisition, representation, storage, and retrieval was proposed by Kroll and Stewart (1994). The model assumes that a bilingual speaker has a large lexical or word store for their first language (L1) and a smaller store for their second language (L2). A third store, a conceptual one, is closely linked to the bilingual's first language. This store contains the semantic or world knowledge that a person has acquired through time. On the lexical level, L2 is closely linked to L1 and L2 words are typically attached to L1 when learning a second language. A strong connection forms over time from L1 to the conceptual store, as one first learned to attach names to concepts when acquiring a first language. Weaker lexical or word-to-word links also exist going from L1 to L2, as one is likely to develop some of these links over time as a result of practice and testing one's knowledge in that direction. Weaker connections are also present from L2 to the conceptual store. This link is strengthened as one acquires fluency in a second language. It is thought that the strengthening of this link is the eventual outcome of becoming a fluent bilingual speaker.

The above model, the Revised Hierarchical Model, makes certain predictions regarding language processing for bilingual speakers. For example, tasks that involve conceptual information or semantic processing might be best performed in the dominant language or (L1), while tasks that can be accomplished at a lexical level might be best performed in L2. For example, a categorization task that involves identifying the category name for a class of objects might best be accomplished in the first language, assuming it has remained the dominant one, while a task that involves simple translation might best be performed from the second into the first language (Kroll & Curly, 1988; Kroll & Sholl, 1992; Kroll & Stewart, 1994). This model, however, is not without its

criticisms. Altarriba and Mathis (1997) have shown that the acquisition of conceptual information directly from L2 can be accomplished within the first session of training and does not necessitate practice over time. It is also the case that this particular model is able to predict results only for those words that have a direct one-to-one correspondence across languages (Altarriba, 2000, 2002). How is the semantic or conceptual knowledge of information for *unique* words acquired and how does this knowledge develop over time?

Word-type effects across languages. While it is possible that words that denote concrete objects may share a number of features across languages (e.g., house and its Spanish equivalent "casa"), abstract words might share fewer features (e.g., power and its Spanish equivalent "poder"). In the literature on bilingualism, it has been reported that concrete words are translated more quickly than abstract words (de Groot, 1992a, 1992b, 1993). Degree of semantic similarity or semantic overlap in terms of features across translations has been shown to be a stronger predictor of word-priming effects than has merely the strength of association between translations (see e.g., Williams, 1994). For some word types, translations share relatively few features, as is the case with abstract words. This is also typically the case with emotion words. Only a subset of elements is shared across these words within the two languages. For example, the word "cariño" may overlap with the English word *affection* but also overlaps with the word *liking*. In fact, no single word in the English language captures all of the nuances of the word "cariño" as it is applied in various contexts, and in various forms (Altarriba, 2002). The fact that words may not share complete featural overlap across languages motivated de Groot to develop a distributed model of bilingual word representation. Within this

framework, a word and its translation might overlap partially or completely depending upon the degree of semantic, conceptual, orthographic, etc., similarity shared across words. This model allows for the fact that words like table and its Spanish counterpart "mesa" are almost completely overlapping representations while words like liking and "cariño" may only share a subset of linguistic features (de Groot, 1993). A model such as de Groot's implies that words that have significant overlap across languages are easily interchangeable, whereas those that share few features are more language-specific. This language specificity is directly relevant to the use of a bilingual mode of communication when expressing specific emotional events from a bilingual's memory.

Emotion and Language Dominance

Although the study of the encoding and storage of emotions words (e.g., love, hate, fear) has received little attention by cognitive researchers of bilingualism, authors in other realms have noted differential patterns of usage as a function of language dominance or fluency (cf. Heredia, 1997). Gonzalez-Reigosa (1976), for example, demonstrated that taboo words presented in the native or dominant language elicited more anxiety in participants than taboo words presented in a second language or neutral words in the dominant language. Bond and Lai (1986) further suggested that it is *easier* to discuss more embarrassing topics in one's second language than in one's dominant language. Their conclusions were drawn from a study in which female Chinese undergraduates at the University of Hong Kong interviewed each other in Cantonese and in English. Interviews were conducted in the first and the second language and four topics were discussed. Two had previously been rated as embarrassing and two as neutral. The embarrassing topics involved sexual attitudes of Chinese and Westerners

and a description of a personally embarrassing event recently experienced by the experimental participant. Results revealed that participants spoke for a greater length of time about embarrassing topics if they spoke in English (L2) rather than in Spanish (L1). These results and those of others imply that code-switching to one's second language can serve a distancing function—a type of defense mechanism—allowing the speaker to address issues that would be upsetting when discussed in the dominant language. It appears that individuals tend to represent emotion words differently in their two languages and typically associate these words with a broader range of emotion in their native language (Altarriba, 2002; Santiago-Rivera & Altarriba, 2002).

Bilingual Approaches to Counseling and Therapy

The work reviewed above leads directly into the implications of language-specificity in bilingual memory for work that is routinely done in the counseling setting. Language is a primary means through which counselors, clinicians, and mental health workers communicate with patients and clients. For bilinguals, two sets of language labels exist in memory with either language-specific or common conceptual representations. This might provide for a greater degree of expressiveness among clients as they can choose from two different sets of concepts and ideas when communicating in both languages. On the other hand, as mentioned above, bilingual clients can exhibit avoidance behavior by choosing a language that might minimize the actual reinstatement of particularly emotional or painful memories. Marcos (1976) named the emotional detachment that bilinguals often have in their second language as the *detachment effect*. In his theory, he described the second language as serving an intellectual function and being devoid of emotion; whereas the native language expressed the emotional content.

Marcos (1976) believed that this split could be maximized or minimized depending upon what was trying to be achieved in therapy. For instance, if the patient were describing a particularly upsetting event to the therapist, the second language could be used to prevent the client from becoming too overcome with grief to continue. The therapist could serve as a guide to the patient with regard to what language is used. If the patient seemed ready to deal with the emotions, the therapist could encourage the patient to use their native or dominant language. Depending on whether or not the therapist was also bilingual, the patient would then be asked to fully translate what they had said, or a trained interpreter would be asked to translate. Ideally, the therapist would be able to understand the native tongue and continue the conversation in the language that the patient wished to continue speaking in (Altarriba & Santiago-Rivera, 1994; Santiago-Rivera & Altarriba, 2002).

In light of a psychodynamic model, the mother tongue is seen as useful in recognizing unconscious thoughts, desires, and affect, as well as early emotions and memories. However, a return to the mother tongue may also be used to regress to a childlike state or even repress material further (Rozensky & Gomez, 1983). Rozensky and Gomez believed that repressed material may be accessed through the first or second language; however, the mother tongue would reflect the event most accurately. The therapist could gain the clearest understanding of these emotions through the controlled use of language switching in therapy.

Conclusions

The research presented above indicates that multicultural training and competency building for counselors and mental health workers should ultimately focus on the cognitive aspects of language acquisition and development particularly among bilingual speakers. Education and training related to the use of multiple languages as a *tool* for the

mental health practitioner should lead to improved strategies for communication in the therapeutic setting and, ultimately, to improved outcomes. The above discussion focuses on the merging of cognitive theory in language representation and pragmatic features of the dynamic interaction between client and therapist. The arguments made here indicate that (a) bilingual speakers have two language systems that may or may not overlap, (b) language-specific representations may exist, specifically for *emotions*, and (c) that an automatic or strategic use of more than one language could have varying implications for the expression of ideas, beliefs, and feelings among bilingual and multilingual clients. Future directions in research should be aimed at uncovering a framework for applying these ideas to the training and educating of students in related fields within the study of mental health.

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